Institute of Environmental Health Secrets: NIEHS Mum on $25 Million RF Animal Project

Skirts Freedom of Information Act

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NIEHS really doesn't want to talk about it. Ten years into a $25+ million project to assess the cancer risk of wireless radiation in laboratory animals, the staff at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences remains tight-lipped and refuses to release project documents.

NIEHS has many reasons for keeping a low profile. The RF project, the most expensive in National Toxicology Program history, is years late and two-to-three times over budget. A more immediate concern is that it could force the institute into a position it would desperately prefer to avoid: Being at the center of the ever-contentious controversy over cell phone radiation and cancer.

NIEHS could end up being in the hot seat at a time industry lobbyists and some radiation officials are trying to downplay RF's IARC designation as a possible human carcinogen. But if the ongoing animal studies were to show a cancer risk, there would be intense pressure to move in the opposite direction: An upgrade from *possible* to *probable* (and perhaps to *known)*. It would not be a hard sell after Alex Lerchl's group in Germany reported that RF promoted cancer in mice earlier this year.

There's another reason: Pilot NTP experiments found that rats did respond to both GSM and CDMA cell phone radiation. Those exposed before and after birth gained weight more slowly. The exposure levels were higher than those normally associated with cell phones and Wi-Fi, but close enough to challenge the widely-held view that wireless radiation is harmless. Importantly, the observed effects were dose-dependent.

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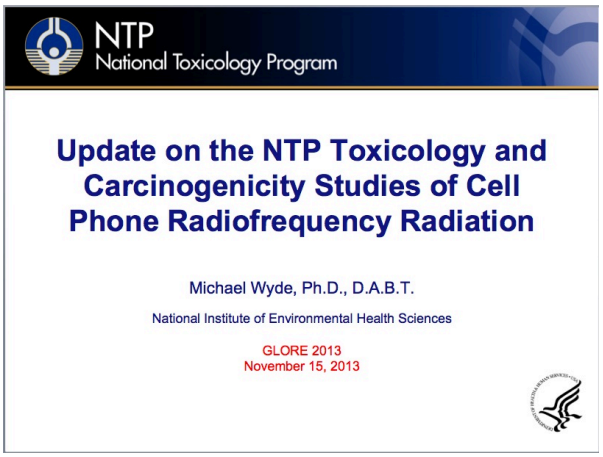
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These results have been circulating among a select few, while NIEHS has been keeping them out of public view. NIEHS' Michael Wyde, the coordinator of the NTP project, disclosed them at a by-invitation-only meeting more than two years ago. (We've been told that they made an impression on those who were there; we should also note that these findings are not directly related to cancer.)



The first slide of Michael Wyde's PowerPoint from his talk at the November 2013 GLORE meeting in Washington DC

Wyde was speaking at the annual meeting of the Global Coordination of Research and Health on RF Electromagnetic Fields (known as GLORE), held that year, 2013, at the FCC offices in Washington. *Microwave News* has obtained a copy of Wyde's GLORE PowerPoint; download it here. The public and the press were barred from the meeting, while representatives from Motorola and Orange (formerly France Telecom) were allowed to attend (see the program here).

In his talk, Wyde also presented an overview of the RF chronic experiments which include exposing rats and mice for two years (but, to the dismay of some, not for the animals' entire lifetime) to either GSM or CDMA cell phone-like signals at SARs ranging from 1.5 W/Kg to 10 W/Kg. Wyde did not respond to a request for an interview.

NIEHS Refuses To Release RF Documents

Over the years, Wyde has not answered any of our messages asking for project updates. So, on January 5, 2015, *Microwave News* filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) for documents related to the NTP RF Project. We specifically asked for copies of monthly progress reports, required under the contract between NIEHS and IITRI in Chicago, where the exposures were carried out under the leadership of David McCormick. The contract took effect on August 18, 2005. Eleven months after we made our request, NIEHS has not released any of the more than 120 monthly reports, which should have been submitted by IITRI.

Under the FOIA law, federal agencies are charged with responding to requests for documents within 20 working days, just about a calendar month.

Microwave News also requested copies of Wyde's presentations as well as any by his boss, John Bucher, the associate director and operational head of the NTP. On March 16, Patricia Stockton, the NIEHS' freedom of information coordinator, made available a number of Wyde's PowerPoints, but without specifying when and where they had been presented. When we asked for clarification, Stockton replied that NTP staff had informed her that the "dates may be embedded within the presentations." We could not find them, perhaps because we did not know where to look. She maintained that, "We do not have any other dates associated with these presentations."

Wyde's presentation at GLORE 2013, which had been shared with Motorola and Orange more than a year earlier, was not among the undated PowerPoints we received from Stockton in response to our FOIA request.

We followed up and asked Stockton for a firmer timeline on the release of the monthly reports. She responded that members of the NIEHS team had located about 90 documents and the search was continuing. "They have more to gather," Stockton wrote. More than eight months later, none of those documents has yet been released.

On April 20, frustrated by NIEHS' stonewalling and thinking that this was perhaps not only a violation of law but a breach of ethics, we wrote to Bruce Androphy, an attorney who serves as the director of the NIEHS Ethics Office. (Yes, there is an ethics office.) In a terse reply, Androphy made it clear he saw no need to get involved. He just stated that our FOIA request "is still being processed." That is where the request stands today, more than six months later. By not denying it, NIEHS is able to block an appeal to a higher and, presumably, a more disinterested party —a strategy increasingly being used by government agencies to thwart compliance with the FOIA law.

More recently, we wrote to Bucher to ask why the institute is keeping the public dark about the project. We also asked what was causing all the delays. Back in 2009, Bucher had told a U.S. Senate hearing that the results of the NTP experiments would be ready for review in 2014. Bucher did not respond.

In 2010, long before the NTP experiments got underway, Bucher stunned some observers by predicting that the $25 million project would come up empty, telling a reporter that they would not see any indications that RF radiation is a cancer agent. (See "Will NIEHS Ever 'Get' EMFs.")

Federal Health Agencies Left in the Dark

Meanwhile, the federal agencies charged with addressing RF health risks are waiting for the results. The NTP project came up at last month's teleconference of the Interagency RF Working Group.

Everyone had lost track of it. “No one has been talking about it,” Jerry Puskin, the director for science and technology in EPA’s Radiation Protection Division and a member of the working group, said in an interview. “The results could be very important.”

Joe Bowman at NIOSH in Cincinnati, another working group member, put the NTP project in context: “With this big animal study out there, what I tell workers about their RF exposures today could be wrong tomorrow. I think the debate on RF and cancer is on a knife’s edge. It could go either way.”

Robin Mackar, the news director at NIEHS, offered the following status report by e-mail:

> “There are several manuscripts in preparation that will describe the design and function of the reverberation chamber exposure system, and results from the pilot studies on the effects on mice and rats of short-term exposures to RFR including body temperature, body weight, and survival and assessments of damage to DNA. We anticipate submission to peer-reviewed journals very soon. The major in-life portion of the studies is complete and the animals are currently in pathology.”

We wrote back to Mackar to ask if there really was no one at NIEHS who would be willing to talk about the project. She did not reply.

NTP RF Animal Project: Timeline

1999 FDA nominates RF from wireless devices for testing by NTP

2001 NTP decides to sponsor RF–cancer studies (cost ~$10 million)

2003 NTP solicits proposals for RF–cancer experiments

2004 NTP issues second request for proposals

2005 NTP signs contract with IITRI in Chicago to carry out exposures

2007 Exposure systems made by IT'IS installed at IITRI

2009 Principal investigator Ron Melnick retires, Michael Wyde takes over

2013 Wyde presents results of pilot studies at GLORE meeting

2014-15 Exposures of two-year studies completed

2016 Final results anticipated.

NTP, NIEHS, RF animal studies, Michael Wyde, Ron Melnick, John Bucher, IITRI, David McCormick, FOIA, Jerry Puskin, EPA, Joe Bowman, NIOSH, IT'IS, Robin Mackar,

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